Feature Articles

Unruly Others: Language Teachers and the Policing of Gender in International Development

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Abstract

This paper considers the policing of gender as a dimension of English language teachers' experiences in international development work. I argue that international development zones have tended to reproduce the patriarchal regimes of an earlier colonial era and provide a challenging context for a (mostly) feminised language teaching profession. Just as colonial space, away from the safety of home, was primarily constructed as a domain of masculine endeavour, so too contemporary development missions, particularly in areas designated as politically unstable, produce a masculine domain that marginalises 'unruly others' defined by gender and race.

要旨

本稿では、国際開発の現場における英語教師という経験の中で、ジェンダーがどのように取り扱われ、規制されるかを考察する。国際開発の現場では、植民地時代の男性優位の体制が再構築されがちであり、その多くは女性である語学教師という職にとって、困難な環境を構築している。植民地という領域は、安全な故郷から離れた主に男性の企ての領域として歴史的に構築されてきたが、現在でも、特に政治的に不安定とされる地域における開発使節団は、ジェンダーや人種により定義された「手に負えない他者」を排斥する男性支配の場を構築している。

Introduction

In this article I discuss the gendered construction of international development aid as a context for the work of English language teachers. Drawing on interview data, the paper explores the experiences of white Australian women working as English language teachers for international development projects in East Timor[1]. Despite the emphasis on gender equity in development rhetoric, the women's experiences suggest that the male dominated international development community, influenced in part by an international military presence, produced a neo-colonial space in which women were perceived as an anomaly. In this context, white women became objects of expatriate male desire and surveillance, their mobility constrained by the threat allegedly posed by indigenous male violence. The intertwined gender and racial relations established by these expatriate discourses testify to the persistence of colonial relations of power in contemporary enterprises of development and language education.

East Timor officially became the world's newest independent nation in 2002, after centuries of struggle against Portuguese colonial rule and a quarter century of Indonesian occupation. The withdrawal of Indonesian military forces and administration in 1999 was accompanied by a wave of violence that destroyed much of the country's infrastructure and resulted in loss of lives and mass dislocation of the Timorese population. Across the country, the burning of almost all school buildings and the disappearance of most teachers who fled back to Indonesia, meant the destruction of the entire education system almost overnight. In an effort to quell the violence, the United Nations authorised the deployment of a multinational peacekeeping force, and in subsequent years international agencies have channeled significant funding towards East Timor's reconstruction and development.

Australian interest in East Timor, which lies just 500 kilometres north of Darwin, has been motivated by historical allegiances, by the promise of access to rich oil and gas reserves that lie in the sea between the two nations, by a sense of solidarity with the Timorese struggle for independence, and by strategic concerns for stable relations with our northern neighbours. For almost a decade, East Timor has been an important component of Australia's international aid program, with a focus on assisting in key areas including governance, health and education. In recent years, Australian military forces have also been deployed in response to periodic violence, and in this climate East Timor has at times been seen as a danger zone for those working in Australian aid projects. English language teachers have been amongst the teams of Australian aid workers in East Timor, and their narratives, along with my own experiences, form the basis of this article.

Locating Development Projects in Context

Elly: As a woman it was probably one of the freakiest experiences of my life ... The whole bar scene, the pick up in the bars, like those World War II movies. And men, those truckloads of soldiers looking like predators, looking at us like predators. They'd drive past and ... I'd think ... thank god I'm not in one of the villages that you're liberating!

Elly was one of a dozen white, female, Australian aid workers I interviewed about their experiences of teaching English language in development projects in East Timor[2]. Like several others, including myself, Elly taught English language for academic and vocational purposes on a short term contract at a tertiary institution in Timor. Her observations of development as "one of the freakiest experiences of my life", raise some interesting questions about international development as a gendered context for English language teaching. These include questions about the influence of military intervention in a language teaching context, about the interplay of race and gender in the contact zone[3] of development, and about the importance of gender equality as a goal of international development. In this paper I touch on several of these points to address a central question: How can we understand international development as a gendered context for English language teaching?

To answer this question, we need to see Elly's experiences from the perspective of development as an historical descendant of an earlier colonial age, an age in which the economic and social conditions for present day development enterprises were established. The era of international development was born in the post-World War II phase of decolonisation and, as such, development can be seen as a modern outgrowth of asymmetrical colonial relations between wealthy so-called 'developed'[4] (and formerly colonial) nations and poorer, 'underdeveloped' or 'developing' (formerly colonised) nations.

Colonial expenditure that had been aimed at expanding the trade opportunities of colonial powers gave way to financial investments referred to as aid, and tended to be concentrated in countries where donors had strategic political or past colonial connections. Previously colonised countries have been viewed as lacking the means to modernise and develop, thus justifying the need for ongoing intervention by the 'First World' in 'less advanced' nations in the form of economic assistance, the transfer of modern scientific and technical knowledge (Escobar, 2004; Kingdon, 1999), and the embodiment of this knowledge in English as the international language of modernisation and progress. In these processes, modernisation and development are framed in terms of achieving economic and social change under the banner of progress towards a First World ideal. In many respects, however, international development became a means of maintaining the interests and hierarchies of colonialism.

Since the end of the Cold War era, the geopolitical interests of donor countries have been increasingly focused on development assistance in conflict and post-conflict environments such as East Timor, where there is a close association between aid and military intervention (Addison, 2000; Jeffreys, 2002). In particular, since September 11, critics have argued that development assistance, as "one thread in the 'war on terror'" (Kingsbury, 2004, p. 2), has been motivated by the West's will to govern in regions of the globe deemed to be politically unstable (Duffield, 2002). In these regions, development assistance provides a means whereby donors may work to win hearts and minds by sponsoring social welfare programs in areas such as health and education. English language teaching plays a key part in this process of persuasion (Karmani, 2005), and yet the privileging of English may serve to recreate forms of dependency on Anglophone donor nations. The contextual complexity of these situations reminds us of the continuing need for English language teachers to reflect on their positioning in regard to broader geopolitical agendas (Appleby, Copley, Sithirajvongsa & Pennycook, 2002).

Military co-location lends a particularly patriarchal flavour to development enterprises, promoting masculinisation through the "policing of bodies" (Rose, 1993, p. 37), and reproducing in development sites an image of the colonies as "a place of masculine endeavour where heroic individual males behave in adventurous ways, exploring undiscovered lands and subduing the inhabitants" (Mills, 1994, pp. 36-37). In such places, white female workers tend to be an anomaly: in colonial and postcolonial contexts, they are cast as unruly, unnecessary, or at the service of male desire that silences female desire through labeling and denigration (Ramazanoglu, 1993). Their anomalous positioning also rests on the contrast between, on the one hand, their privileged membership of an international elite and, on the other hand, their subordination to a patriarchal regime that operates within that elite community.

Gender Equality as a Goal of International Development

In recent decades, gender equality has been a key goal of international development programs. Gender equality in education is valued as a major contributor towards economic growth: it is accepted, at least rhetorically, by numerous government and international organisations, and is enshrined in international agreements and commitments including the Millennium Development Goals[6]. Initiatives to improve gender equality in development programs are channeled into the twin strategies of gender balance (aiming for the employment of equal numbers of men and women in development personnel), and gender mainstreaming (ensuring gender considerations are incorporated into the design and delivery of all development programs).

Apart from the underlying economic imperatives, promoting gender equality is broadly framed in terms of achieving social progress, on the assumption that economically developed donor nations present a more progressive model of gender equality than undeveloped or Third World nations. However, one of the many problems with this all-encompassing ideal of progress towards a social goal is that it classifies nations and societies along a normative scale that bears the legacy of a colonial era. At one end of the scale are the (formerly colonial) nations categorised as highly developed and socially advanced; at the other end are placed those (formerly colonised) nations that are seen as underdeveloped and socially backward. This sort of classification seeps into all areas of the national identity when seen from the viewpoint of the developed world. From this perspective, gender inequity is imagined as a problem that has been solved in the First World, and is now solely confined to communities in the so-called Third World, or non-Western nations. Critical feminist and postcolonial scholars have noted that this not only overestimates the conditions of gender equity in the West, but also fails to take into account the sexualised violence that accompanies international development, with its mission for the spread of global capitalism and its links to the "increasing militarization (and masculinization) of the globe" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 229).

Despite the emphasis on gender equity in development rhetoric, the close association between military intervention and international development projects can produce iniquitous effects in gender relations (Mazurana, Raven-Roberts, Parpart & Lautze, 2005). In some media representations of militarised development (see, for example, Forbes & Allard, 2006) we see the legacy of heroic colonial discourses of race and gender, so aptly summarized in Spivak's (1994, p. 10) critique of the colonial mission as "white men, seeking to save brown women from brown men". In contrast to these heroic images, the media also presents reports of peacekeepers and aid workers involved in sexual abuse of women and children in the very communities that they are charged with protecting and assisting (Bowcott, 2005; Gillan & Moszynski, 2002; Ward, 2000; Wax, 2005). These media representations suggest that a disjuncture has occurred between, on the one hand, development policies that promote women's empowerment through gender equality and, on the other hand, experience in the field, in devastated communities where poor women may suffer the consequences of patriarchal and sexist regimes that accompany development aid and military intervention. In these reports of abuse, "racial and sexual violence are yoked together [in an] abiding and recurrent metaphor for colonial relations" that too often persists in the practices of international development (Loomba, 1998, p. 164).

Contextual Conditions for Female English Language Teachers in East Timor

In this section, I consider English language teachers' experiences of the gender relations produced with the influx of international military and development missions in post-independence East Timor. Being in this hypermasculine context had a considerable impact on the women in my research, as they faced the challenges of negotiating their place in an international community where all were affected by the spirit of being in a war zone. I focus on the narratives of two white Australian teachers, Elly (from several transcribed interviews and casual conversations) and Helen (from transcribed interviews and letters sent from East Timor). All quotes and text in italics throughout the remainder of this article are from these two participants. Both Elly and Helen were qualified English language teachers with previous experience in teaching outside Australia and, while in East Timor, worked in English language programs for development agencies. Elly was in her late 20s, Helen in her 40s.

Reflecting on their accounts, and my own experiences of language teaching in East Timor, I argue that rather than the First World international community exemplifying a discourse of progress in gender relations, it seemed that the expatriate community had instead gone backwards in time, producing a seedy underworld of intensely dichotomised gender roles that reflected the colonial heritage of development.

Elly conservatively estimated the gender ratio amongst the expatriate community in Dili at the time as "*nine men to one woman*", and observed that the degree of active military presence seemed to establish a patriarchal mood, even influencing aid workers and journalists to don "*little military outfits: there was something very 'war-games-y'*", something "*very male, about the whole scene*". The emergency scenario and 'war games' atmosphere constructed a particular type of gendered space, and appeared to attract the sort of men who "*would just never get jobs with that sort of authority or money or sense of importance at home, and they can do it all in these situations*". Neither expatriate nor local women were obviously visible in the public domain, and the prevailing message to women seemed to be "*watch out, it's males that operate here*".

This situation had significant effects on some teachers' sense of being 'read' as female. Elly's strongest complaints concerned being identified by men as a "*sex object*" in a way that was reminiscent of Australia in earlier decades. In social situations, she felt some of the men she met "*were able to acknowledge the value of the person they were speaking to*", but her specific criticism concerned the reduction of interactions to a sexual exchange, and therefore the exclusion of other possible ways of interacting on the basis of professional or social interest and respect. Social behaviour in the expatriate leisure spaces was described as "*sexist*" and "*predatory: people were out to score in a real kind of meat market*".

> *Why was it so bad? Because there was no attempt for people to make friends, people didn't even bother to have a conversation about who I really was, and then thought 'Oh, this woman's interesting', ... that's not what it was. They bloody looked at the room, looked at women as bloody sex objects, and they came over with the intention of inviting you somewhere, I guess on the basis of looks or something. No, I don't even think it was on the basis of looks, I think it was on the basis of being a new female that had arrived. That you happened to be female, that's what I think it was. And I hated it, I just think it was so gross. I got so tired of expat type people.*

Elly, like many of the women teachers, was offended by these reductive exchanges, and the consequent assumptions that seemed to arise regarding her sexual availability. She described the uncomfortable experience of being observed, discussed and reduced to a sexed body in one of the expatriate bars where development workers and military personnel mixed:

> *There were a couple of UN guys there, at that army bar. Do you remember, there was a black UN guy and I was chatting to him, and I left and he came out and said, 'Oh well, I've got her in the bag!' And basically he had this running thing about how long it would take to get me into bed. And I just died.*

This "*incredibly sexist*" regime was felt to be far more primitive than in Australia, and Elly reasoned that by travelling overseas, 'normal' social expectations were removed, allowing some expatriate men to "*revert to that type of behaviour*":

> *It was bizarre. I just felt I was kind of flipped back into some spy novel of the 1930s or 40s, I felt like I was in Biggles, 'cause there's no girls in Biggles, because it's like that old British foreign service stuff that has this overlay of politeness but has the seedy underworld, and it kind of felt like the old politeness has gone, it's just the seedy underworld in Timor.*

With the veneer of politeness stripped away, the *"incredibly archaic, double standard"* operated as a means of surveillance and control. Elly observed expatriate men *"having a wife at home and sleeping [their] way around the world as well"*, but believed such men judged the behaviour of women by a different standard:

> *I don't have any problems with casual sex for Christ's sake, but the parameters, the way it was set up, it was set up as a boy's game, not as a mutual kind of - put it this way, if [a woman] went off for casual sex, you'd get a reputation as being a slacker, a slut, and it would go round and you'd pay the price. Would [a man] pay the price? No, he'd be the hero because he's the king bonker and he's out there wheeling and dealing, it's kind of like they were entrepreneurs. It was bizarre.*

The experience of a gendered social space presented by Helen was remarkably similar to that described above, and her letters indicated that she found the enforced company of certain groups of men to be tedious:

> *There are about six of us women at the [residential] hotel and we're sick of being patronised by men droning on at us as if we have never travelled in our lives, never asking us about ourselves ... There are so many men here, some of whom have difficulty recognising boundaries or accepting that we might not be that desperate for their company.*

Helen expressed ambivalent reactions of enjoyment, disgust and fear at being in a male domain where at times she felt relatively powerless. She described certain hotels frequented by expatriate men as places to *"scoff at the trough, drink beer and watch violent, noisy videos night after night"*. These were hostile places for women, where some men would be *"groping"* and harassing:

> *The biggest threat came from predatory Australian men. There were some real sexist creeps who just couldn't seem to understand that we had not come to Timor to get laid. It was quite fun [at first] as this has not happened to me in years. But one man in particular started to harass me and I got really freaked by this. I am no supermodel, believe me. I think it was a case of anything in a skirt!*

Helen recognised that her fear was partly a result of her sense of disorientation in a 'strange' place: *"I had lost my sense of perspective, I mean, here I am this middle aged woman, I'm saying 'wah-wah-wah, he scares me'"*. Her unease was intensified when incidents of harassment would occur in places where members of the Timorese community were present. In these events, Helen's observation highlighted the behaviour of expatriate men as doubly inappropriate, both in terms of what would be acceptable in an Australian cultural domain, and perhaps even more so in Timorese cultural interactions:

> *You know, touching me in the wrong way, and bothering me, winding me up in front of Timorese or, you know, grabbing me in the wrong, you know, if anything like that happens in front of the Timorese it's ten times worse. He did it to me at a party and I just nearly died. Awful.*

In their accounts, both Elly and Helen articulated the feelings of many of the women teachers in East Timor. They saw expatriate men in the development context taking on the extreme masculine behaviours identified in feminist analyses of the colonial era (Mills, 1994), producing geosocial conditions that were hostile to women, and which depicted women as unruly bodies to be watched and controlled. Thus, despite the supposedly progressive discourses of social justice and gender equity espoused in development rhetoric, female teachers experienced expatriate communities as sites characterised by social discord and temporal regression that marginalised women and reinforced their anomalous positioning.

Gendered Interactions with East Timorese

Female teachers' interaction with the Timorese community were also affected by an air of impending danger, underscored by the ever-present military forces. Rumours circulated of imminent militia activity, political instability, and struggle amongst factions in the establishment of the new nation's political regime. Troops and armoured vehicles patrolled the streets, helicopters swooped over the beaches, and US and Indonesian warships appeared in the harbour. In the general atmosphere of alarm, teachers were warned to exercise caution wherever they went. On an everyday level, there were increasing reports of attacks on expatriates, particularly as frustration with the foreign aid and military 'occupation' wore on. While the relatively wealthy international workforce was fully employed (re)constructing the country, local levels of unemployment remained high, producing tensions around racial, economic and gendered divisions. Helen observed that the streets had become the domain of two groups: a male dominated *"UN junket",* and clusters of *"bored and frustrated young men feeling like second class citizens"*:

> *There were a lot of foreigners going running and stuff like that, with their wallets and what have you, early in the morning or at dusk, and making themselves vulnerable really, just not understanding that there would be that rather odd reaction to them. But there was also a lot of hostility on the street, the brutalised atmosphere and a lot of frustrated young people around. There's no money and that massive UN gravy train where people- the place was really, really full of foreigners living very affluent lifestyles, driving around and throwing money about.*

In this environment, the threat to women aid workers' safety had the effect of maintaining masculine domination and control. Concern over security issues affected the attitude of aid organisations towards their staff, and was reflected in the warnings given to female teachers. Aid organisations conducted regular briefings for staff, where Helen recalled being advised about current threat levels, about unsafe areas – markets, beaches, in crowds and any political gatherings, about emergency evacuation procedures, and warnings for teachers *"to keep our mobiles with us at all times"*. Increasing reports of street and beach attacks on white women meant that *"the whole place was completely paranoid, absolutely paranoid"*. As in colonial times, these fears seemed at times to focus on the specific dangers to white women, who

appeared to be implicitly "mythologized as the desired objects of colonized men" (Stoler, 1995, p. 183). The call to "protect White womanhood (pure virtuous and 'civilizing')" (Jeffrey, 2002, p. xxiii) from the sexual threat of the colonised other – here in the form of menacing Timorese militia or unemployed youths – necessitated the redrawing of racial boundaries, and reaffirmed the need to monitor and confine women for their own safety:

> *Oh my god! We weren't allowed to leave the hotel just about, we were told to stay away from any meeting, any gathering of people, you know, don't go out at night, don't go to the beach alone, be careful of people in the street.*

Despite early feelings of alarm, over time teachers began to realise that many of the reputed dangers were inflated, with donor organisations making "*the threat and the risk much worse than it actually is ... [they] exaggerate the security issues, to suit their own purposes, and ... to control our movements ... Our every move was vetted and watched*". The warnings not only restricted women's mobility, but also served to secure a patronising, protective role for men, who appeared pleased to be "*hectoring us about how to keep safe. They all do it*". As a result, Helen lamented, "*I feel a bit marooned in the expatriate enclave and I miss [my] freedom of movement*". In the complex patterns of gendered behaviour in this postcolonial environment, we see a reproduction of colonial relations in which "sexual desire [was] a crucial transfer point of power, tangled with racial exclusions in complicated ways" (Stoler, 1995, p. 190). A discourse of fear was produced, "defined by powerful others who control the view" where the masculinist claims to 'know' – what the dangers were, how to avoid them – were "experienced as a claim to space and territory" (Rose, 1993, p. 148).

Being the Teacher

In these volatile times there *were* real threats to physical safety; many of the women *were* discomforted by the amount of overt attention they received from Timorese men in public places, and were at times fearful for their security. But regardless of the harassment in the streets and on the beach, it never occurred in the grounds of the university, where the women appeared to be 'read' not as sexed bodies, but in terms of a professional identity tied to a specific place. Elly demonstrated this contrast succinctly: "*you couldn't lie on the beach, you did get completely harassed there. And certainly I got followed around in town a fair bit too. But not on campus: I was 'the teacher' on campus*". As they took on the role of teachers, the women's perceptions of their gendered selves changed. Whereas on the streets and beaches they were harassed with cat calls, whistles, and invitations for sex, once they entered the campus of the university, all that stopped and they became 'the teacher'.

If they were to take on the role assigned to development workers, the teachers in their professional capacities then had to reorient themselves from being subjects in a patriarchal regime to being agents of change in the development process (Savage, 1997). Given the social patterning within the international community, and the hierarchical relations between the international and Timorese communities, the expectation that they model and promote gender equity sits awkwardly with their contradictory positioning outside the classroom. If we take seriously the idea that the classroom doesn't exist in isolation from the world outside its walls, we can see that the context of development provides a complex, paradoxical, and at times unstable ground for the negotiation of gender in relation to English language teaching and to the English language speaking communities represented by international development. A discussion of the ways in which teachers negotiated the challenges of gender dynamics in

their classroom practice is beyond the scope of this article, but has been pursued in a different forum (see Appleby, 2007; Appleby, 2009).

Conclusion

Development programs designed to ameliorate conditions of gender inequality in developing communities implicitly suggest that representatives of wealthier, donor nations have a contribution to make in terms of modeling gender equality. In these assumptions we see the colonial legacy of civilising discourses that have shaped educational endeavours in contemporary international development. These discourses continue to position teachers in the role of enlightening the colonised subjects as the other of Western progress and culture (Jones & Ball, 1995), a role that historically has been at least as important as the transmission of disciplinary knowledge. However, the incidence of inequality and sexism appearing within the expatriate community in this particular development context suggests that donor nations could hardly be held as a shining example of progress in gender reforms.

If English language teachers are to take seriously the challenges of incorporating gender perspectives in language education, then recognition must be given to impact of First World intervention in development sites, and to the way gender relations are shaped by race, class, geography, and colonial tradition in specific locations (Pavlenko, 2004). In this contact zone, the reproduction of dichotomised gender and racial stereotypes testifies to the endurance of colonial relations of power in contemporary development enterprises. These complex connections have particular implications for language education, and for what we focus on as language teachers concerned with social justice and equality. Given the hierarchical relations that persist in militarised development sites, it seems that a useful place for teachers and students to interrogate these issues might not be solely within the host community, but rather at the very meeting point of the international and the local communities, where gender, race and economic status are salient and divisive categories, and where 'unruly others' are marked for exclusion.

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Notes

1. For an extended account of the teachers' experiences see Appleby, R. (forthcoming) *Time, Space and Gender: English Language Teaching in International Development*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

2. Elly and Helen are pseudonyms for two of twelve teachers I invited to participate in interviews about their experiences of teaching in East Timor. I taught on the same two month program as Elly (and three other interviewees), and Helen taught in a three month follow-up program in the same institution. All interviewees gave consent for publication of their interview data. All the interviewed participants in this research project were female; male teachers declined invitations to be interviewed. Nevertheless, both male and female views were noted in the process of the larger ethnographic study (referred to in footnote 1), and informed my analysis of data and understanding of emerging themes.

3. I have used the term 'contact zone' to evoke Pratt's notion of a context in which "disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (Pratt, 1992, p. 4).

4. I have used the words 'development', 'developed' and 'underdeveloped', 'Western', 'First World' and 'Third World' throughout this article, but acknowledge these are contested terms which have generated widespread disagreement and critique.

5. East Timor has some 16 national languages, with Tetum functioning as a lingua franca. Both Tetum and Portuguese, as the language of an earlier era of colonialism, were secret languages of resistance during the 25 years of Indonesian occupation and Indonesian language policy. In 2002, following vigorous language debates, the new East Timor constitution granted Portuguese and Tetum equal status as official languages, with Bahasa Indonesia and English identified as non-official utilities. Despite this policy, since 1999 the influx of international agencies using English as the common language of communication has generated a popular demand amongst local communities for English language training.

6. See United Nations Millennium Development Goal number 3: Promote gender equality and empower women.